Two Women

A.D. 1862

A Poem.

C. F. Woolson

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

TWO WOMEN.

TWO WOMEN:

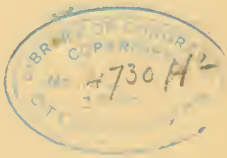
1862.

A POEM.

BY

CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON.

(Reprinted from Appletons' Journal.)



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D. APPLETON AND COMPANY,
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TWO WOMEN.

1862.

ONE.

THROUGH miles of green cornfields that lusty
And strong face the sun and rejoice
In his heat, where the brown bees go dusty
With pollen from flowers of their choice,
'Mong myriads down by the river
Who offer their honey, the train
Flies south with a whir and a shiver,
Flies south through the lowlands that quiver
With ripening grain—

Fair wheat, like a lady for fancies,
Who bends to the breeze, while the corn
Held stiff all his stubborn green lances
The moment his curled leaf was born;
And grapes, where the vineyards are sweeping
The shores of the river whose tide—

Slow moving, brown tide—holds the keeping
Of War and of Peace that lie sleeping,
Couched lions, each side.

Hair curlless, and hid, and smooth-banded,
Blue innocent maidenly eyes,
That gaze at the lawless rough-handed
Young soldiers with grieving surprise
At oaths on their lips, the deriding
And jestings that load every breath,
While on with dread swiftness are gliding
Their moments, and o'er them is biding
The shadow of death!

Face clear-cut and pearly, a slender
Small maiden with calm, home-bred air;
No deep-tinted hues you might lend her
Could touch the faint gold of her hair,
The blue of her eyes, or the neatness
Of quaint little gown, smoothly spun
From threads of soft gray, whose completeness
Doth fit her withdrawn gentle sweetness—
A lily turned nun.

Ohio shines on to her border,
Ohio all golden with grain;

The river comes up at her order,
And curves toward the incoming train;
"The river! The river! O borrow
A speed that is swifter— Afar
Kentucky! Haste, haste, thou To-morrow!"
Poor lads, dreaming not of the sorrow,
The anguish of war.

THE OTHER.

WEST from the Capital's crowded throng
The fiery engine rushed along,
Over the road where danger lay
On each bridge and curve of the midnight way,
Shooting across the rivers' laps,
Up the mountains, into the gaps,
Through West Virginia like the wind,
Fire and sword coming on behind,
Whistling defiance that echoed back
To mountain guerrillas burning the track,
"Do the worst, ye rebels, that ye can do
To the train that follows, but *I* go through!"

A motley crowd—the city thief;
The man of God; the polished chief
Of a band of gamblers; the traitor spy;
The correspondent with quick, sharp eye;
The speculator who boldly made
His fifty per cent. in a driving trade
At the edge of the war; the clean lank clerk
Sent West for sanitary work;
The bounty-jumper; the lordling born
Viewing the country with wondering scorn—
A strange assemblage filled the car
That dared the midnight border-band,
Where life and death went hand-in-hand
Those strange and breathless days of war.

The conductor's lantern moves along,
Slowly lighting the motley throng
Face by face; what sudden gleam
Flashes back in the lantern's beam
Through shadows down at the rearward door?
The conductor pauses; all eyes explore
The darkened corner: a woman's face
Thrown back asleep—the shimmer of lace,
The sheen of silk, the yellow of gold,
The flash of jewels, the careless fold
Of an India shawl that half concealed

The curves superb which the light revealed;
A sweep of shoulder, a rounded arm,
A perfect hand that lay soft and warm
On the dingy seat; all the outlines rare
Of a Milo Venus slumbered there
'Neath the costly silk whose heaviest fold
Subordinate seemed—unnoticed mould
For the form beneath.

The sumptuous grace
Of the careless pose, the sleeping face,
Transfixed all eyes, and together drew
One and all for a nearer view:
The lank clerk hasted, the gambler trod
On the heels of the gazing man of God;
The correspondent took out his book,
Sharpened his pencil with eager look;
The soldiers fought as to who should pass
The first; the lord peered through his glass,
But no sooner saw the sleeping face
Than he too hasted and left his place
To join the crowd.
Then, ere any spoke,
But all eager gazed, the lady woke.

Dark-brown, sleepy, velvet eyes,
Lifted up in soft surprise,

A wealth of hair of auburn red,
Falling in braids from the regal head
Whose little hat with waving plume
Lay on the floor—while a faint perfume,
The roses, crushed in sleep, betrayed,
Tangled within the loosened braid;
Bold features, Nubian lips, a skin
Creamy pallid, the red within
Mixed with brown where the shadow lies
Dark beneath the lustrous eyes.
She smiles; all hearts are at her feet.
She turns; each hastens to his seat.
The car is changed to a sacred place
Lighted by one fair woman's face;
In sudden silence on they ride,
The lord and the gambler, side by side,
The traitor spy, the priest as well,
Bound for the time by a common spell,
And each might be in thought and mien
A loyal knight escorting his queen,
So instant and so measureless
Is the power of a perfect loveliness.

THE MEETING.

THE Western city with the Roman name,
The vine-decked river winding round the hills,
Are left behind; the pearly maid who came
Down from the northern lake whose cool breath fills
The whole horizon, like the green, salt sea,
Is riding southward on the cautious train,
That feels its way along, and nervously
Hurries around the curve and o'er the bridge,
Fearing a rebel ball from every ridge—
The wild adventurous cavalry campaign
That Morgan and his men, bold riders all,
Kept up in fair Kentucky all those years,
So hot with daring deeds, with glowing tears,
That even Peace doth sometime seem a pall,
When men in city offices feel yet
The old wild thrill of "Boots and saddles all!"
The dashing raid they cannot quite forget
Despite the hasty graves that silent lie
Along its route; at home the women sigh,
Gazing across the still untrodden ways,
Across the fields, across the lonely moor,
"O for the breathless ardor of those days
When we were all so happy, though so poor!"

The maiden sits alone;
The raw recruits are scattered through the car,
Talking of all the splendors of the war,
With faces grimed and roistering braggart tone.
In the gray dawning, sweet and fair to view,
Like opening wood-flower pearled with morning dew,
She shines among them in her radiance pure,
Notes all their lawless roughness, sadly sure
They're very wicked—hoping that the day
Of long-drawn hours may safely wear away,
And bring her, ere the summer sunset dies,
To the far farm-house where her lover lies,
Wounded—alone.

The rattling speed turns slow,
Slow, slower all the rusty car-wheels go,
The axles groan, the brakes grind harshly down;
The young conductor comes—(there was a face
He noted in the night)—"Madam, your place
Will soon be noisy, for at yonder town
We take on other soldiers. If you change
Your seat and join that little lady, then
It will not seem so lonely or so strange
For you, as here among so many men."
Lifting her fair face from the battered seat,
Where she had slumbered like a weary child,

The lady, with obedience full sweet
To his young manhood's eager craving, smiled
And rose. Happy, the flushed youth led the way;
She followed in her lovely disarray.
The clinging silk disclosed the archèd foot,
Hidden within the dainty satin boot,
Dead-black against the dead-white even hue
Of silken stocking, gleaming into view
One moment; then the lady sleepily
Adjusted with a touch her drapery,
And tried to loop in place a falling braid,
And smooth the rippling waves the night had made;
While the first sunbeams flashing through the pane
Set her bright gems to flashing back again;
And all men's eyes in that Kentucky car
Grew on her face, as all men's eyes had done
On the night-train that brought her from afar,
Over the mountains west from Washington.

THE LADY (*thinking*).

Haply met,
This country maiden, sweet as mignonette,
No doubt the pride of some small Western town:—
Pity, that she should wear that hopeless gown,
So prim—so dull—a fashion five years old!

THE MAIDEN (*thinking*).

How odd, how bold,
That silken robe—those waves of costly lace,
That falling hair, the shadows 'neath the eyes,
Surely those diamonds are out of place—
Strange, that a lady should in such a guise
Be here alone!

THE LADY.

Allow me, mademoiselle,
Our good conductor thinks it would be well
That we should keep together, since the car
Will soon be overcrowded, and we are
The only women.—May I have a seat
In this safe little corner by your side?
Thanks; it is fortunate, indeed, to meet
So sweet a friend to share the long day's ride!—
That is, if yours be long?

THE MAIDEN.

To Benton's Mill.

THE LADY.

I go beyond, not far—I think we pass
Your station just before Waunona Hill;
But both are in the heart of the Blue Grass.
Do you not love that land?

THE MAIDEN.

I do not know
Aught of it.

THE LADY.

Yes; but surely you have heard
Of the fair plains where the sweet grasses grow,
Just grass, naught else; and where the noble herd
Of blooded cattle graze, and horses bred
For victory—the rare Kentucky speed
That wins the races?

THE MAIDEN.

Yes; I've heard it said
They were good worthy horses.—But indeed
I know not much of horses.

THE LADY.

Then the land—
The lovely, rolling land of the Blue Grass,
The wild free park spread out by Nature's hand
That scarce an English dukedom may surpass
In velvet beauty—while its royal sweep
Over the country miles and miles away,
Dwarfs man-made parks to toys; the great trees keep
Their distance from each other, proud array

Of single elms that stand apart to show
How gracefully their swaying branches grow,
While little swells of turf roll up and fall
Like waves of summer sea, and over all
You catch, when the straight shafts of sunset pass
Over the lea, the glint of the Blue Grass.—
But you will see it.

THE MAIDEN.

No; I cannot stay
But a few hours—at most, a single day.

THE LADY (*unheeding*).

I think I like the best,
Of all dumb things, a horse of Blue-Grass breed,
The Arab courser of our own new West,
The splendid creature, whose free-hearted speed
Outstrips e'en time itself. Oh! when he wins
The race, how, pulsed with pride, I wave my hand
In triumph, ere the thundering shout begins,
And those slow, cautious judges on the stand,
Have counted seconds! Is it not a thrill
That stirs the blood, yet holds the quick breath still?

THE MAIDEN.

I ne'er have seen race-horses, or a race.

THE LADY.

I crave your pardon; in your gentle face
I read reproof.

THE MAIDEN.

I judge not any man.

THE LADY.

Nor woman?

THE MAIDEN.

If you force reply, I can
Speak but the truth. The cruel, panting race,
For gamblers' prizes, seems not worthy place
For women—nor for men, indeed, if they
Were purer grown. Of kindred ill the play,
The dinner loud with wine, the midnight dance,
The deadly poison of all games of chance—
All these are sinful.

THE LADY.

Ah! poor sins, how stern
The judge! I knew ye not for sins—I learn
For the first time that ye are evil. Go,
Avaunt ye! So my races are a woe—
Alas! And David Garrick!—Where's the harm
In David?

THE MAIDEN.

I know not the gentleman.

THE LADY.

Nay, he's a play; a comedy so warm,
So pitiful, that, let those laugh who can,
I weep. And must I yield my crystal glass,
Dewy with ice, and fragrant with rare wine,
That makes a dreary dinner-party pass
In rosy light, where after-fancies shine—
Things that one might have said?—And then the dance,
The *valse à deux temps*, if your partner chance
To be a lover—

THE MAIDEN.

Madam, pray excuse
My seeming rudeness; but I must refuse
To dwell on themes like these.

THE LADY.

Did I begin
The themes, or you?

THE MAIDEN.

But *I* dwelt on the sin,
And you—

THE LADY.

Upon the good. Did I not well?
I gave you good for evil, mademoiselle.

THE MAIDEN.

Forgive me, lady, but I cannot jest,
I bear too anxious heart within my breast;
One dear to me lies wounded, and I go
To find him, help him home with tender care—
To home and health, God willing.

THE LADY.

Is it so?
Strange—but ah! no. The wounded are not rare,
Nor yet the grief, in this heart-rending war.—
But he will yet recover; I feel sure
That one beloved by heart so good, so pure
As yours, will not be taken. Sweet, your star
Is fortunate.

THE MAIDEN.

Not in the stars, I trust.
We are but wretched creatures of the dust,
Sinful, and desperately wicked; still,
It is in mercy our Creator's will
To hear our prayers.

THE LADY.

And do you then believe
He grants all heart-felt prayers? One might conceive
A case: Suppose a loving mother prays
For her son's life; he, worn with life's hard ways,

Entreats his God for death with equal power
And fervor.

THE MAIDEN.

It is wrong to pray for death.

THE LADY.

I grant it not. But, say in self-same hour
A farmer prays for rain; with 'bated breath
A mother, hastening to a dying child,
Prays for fair weather?—But you do not deign
To listen. Ah! I saw you when you smiled
That little, silver smile! I might explain
My meaning further; but why should I shake
Your happy faith?

THE MAIDEN.

You could not.

THE LADY.

Nay, that's true;
You are the kind that walks up to the stake
Unflinching and unquestioning. I sue
For pardon, and I pray you tell me all
This tale of yours. When did your lover fall—
What battle-field?

THE MAIDEN.

Not any well-known name;
It was not Heaven's pleasure that the fame
Of well-known battle should be his. A band
Of wild guerrillas raiding through the land,
Shot him, and left him bleeding by the way.

THE LADY.

Guerrillas?

THE MAIDEN.

Yes; John Morgan's.

THE LADY.

Maybe so,
And maybe not; they bear a seven-leagued name
That many hide beneath; each shot, each blow,
Is trumpeted as theirs, and all the blame
Falls on their shoulders, be it what it may—
Now truth, and now but falsehood. Morgan's men
Are bold Kentucky riders; every glen
Knows their fleet midnight gallop; every map
Kept by our soldiers here is scored with marks
Where they have been; now near, now miles away,
From river lowland to the mountain-gap,
Swift as the rushing wind. No watch-dog barks
When *they* ride by, no well-versed tongues betray

Their resting-place; Kentucky knows her own,
Gives silent, helpful welcome when they pass
Across her borders north from Tennessee,
Heading their horses for the far Blue Grass,
The land of home, the land they long to see,
The lovely rolling land. We might have known
That come they would!

THE MAIDEN.

You are Kentucky-bred?

THE LADY.

I come from Washington. Nay—but I read
The doubt you try to hide. Be frank—confess—
I am that mythical adventuress
That thrives in Washington these troublous days—
The country correspondent's tale?

THE MAIDEN.

Your dress—
And—something in your air—

THE LADY.

I give you praise
For rare sincerity. Go on.

THE MAIDEN.

Your tone,
Your words, seem strange.—But then, I've never known
A woman like you.

THE LADY (*aside*).

Yet we are not few,
Thank Heaven, for the world's sake! It would starve
If gray was all its color, and the dew
Its only nectar. With a pulsing haste
It seeks the royal purples, and draws down
The luscious bunches to its thirsty taste,
And feels its blood hot-thrilled, a regal crown
Upon its brow; and then, its hands do carve
The vine-leaves into marble.
But the hue
Of thoughts like these she knows not—and in vain
To tell her. Yet, sweet snow-drop, I would fain
Hear her small story.
(*Speaks.*) Did he fall alone,
Your gallant soldier-boy? And how to you
Came the sad news?

THE MAIDEN.

A farmer heard him moan
While passing—bore him to the camp, and there

A captain from our lake-shore wrote me word
Ere the brigade moved on; which, when I heard,
I left my mother, ill, for in despair
He cried, they wrote, for me. He could not know
That they had written, for hot fever drove
His thoughts with whips of flame.—O cruel woe,
—O my poor love—
My Willie!

THE LADY.

Do not grieve, fair child. This day
Will see you by his side—nay, if you will,
Then lay your head here—weep your grief away.
Tears are a luxury—yes, take your fill;
For stranger as I am, my heart is warm
To woman's sorrow, and this woman's arm
That holds you is a loyal one and kind.
(*Thinking.*) O gentle maiden-mind,
How lovely art thou—like the limpid brook
In whose small depths my child-eyes loved to look
In the spring days! Thy little simple fears
Are wept away. Ah! could *I* call the tears
At will to soothe the parched heat of my heart!
—O beautiful lost Faith,
I knew you once—but now, like shadowy wraith,
You meet me in this little maiden's eyes,
And gaze from out their blue in sad surprise

At the great gulf between us. Far apart,
In truth, we've drifted—drifted. Gentle ghost
Of past outgrown, thy land the hazy coast
Of dreamless ignorance; I must put out
My eyes to live with you again. The doubt,
The honest, earnest doubt, is upward growth
Of the strong mind—the struggle of the seed
Up to the broad, free air. Contented sloth
Of the blind clods around it sees no need
For change—nay, deems, indeed, all change a crime;
"All things remain as in our fathers' time—
What gain ye then by growing?"
"Air—free air!
E'en though I die of hunger and despair,
I go," the mind replies.

THE MAIDEN (*thinking*).

How kind, how warm
Her sympathy! I could no more resist
Her questions, than the large clasp of her arm
That drew me down. How tenderly she kissed
My forehead! strange that so much good should dwell
With so much ill. This shining, costly dress,
A garb that shows a sinful worldliness,
Troubles my heart.
Ah, I remember well

How hard I worked after that letter came
Telling of Willie—and my sisters all,
How swift we sewed! For I had suffered shame
At traveling in house-garb.
—I feel a call
To bring this wanderer back into the fold,
This poor lost sinner straying in the cold
Outside the church's pale. Should I not try
To show her all the sad deficiency,
The desperate poverty of life like hers,
The utter falseness of its every breath,
The pity that within my bosom stirs
For thinking of the horrors after death
Awaiting her?

THE LADY.

Quite calm, again? That's well.
Wilt taste a peach? My basket holds a store
Of luscious peaches. Ah! she weaves a spell,
This lovely sorceress of fruit; what more
Can man ask from the earth? There is no cost
Too great for peaches. I have felt surprise
Through all my life that fair Eve should have lost
That mythic Asian land of Paradise
For a poor plebeian apple! Now a peach,
Pulpy, pink-veined, hanging within her reach,
Might well have tempted her.

Oh, these long hours!—
Whence comes this faint perfume of hot-house flowers—
Tea-roses?

THE MAIDEN.

Tangled in your loosened hair
Are roses.

THE LADY (*thinking*).

Nita must have twined them there—
The opera—I know now; I have sped
So swift across the country, my poor head
Is turned.—The opera? Yes; then—O heart,
How hast thou bled! [*Dashes away tears.*]
(*Speaks.*) Sweet child, I pray you tell
Again your budding romance, all the part
Where he first spoke. You'd known him long and well,
Your Willie?

THE MAIDEN.

Yes; in childhood we had been
Two little lovers o'er the alphabet;
Then one day—I had grown to just sixteen—
Down in the apple-orchard—there—we met,
By chance—and—

THE LADY (*thinking*).

Blush, thou fine-grained little cheek,
It comforts me to see that e'en thy meek
Child-beauty knows enough of love to blush.

(*Speaks.*) Nay, you flush
So prettily! Well, must *I* tell the rest?
You knew, then, all at once, you loved him best,
This gallant Willie?

THE MAIDEN (*thinking*).

What has come to me
That I do answer, from reserve so free,
This stranger's questions? Yet may it not chance
My confidence shall win hers in return?
I must press on, nor give one backward glance—
Must follow up my gain by words that burn
With charity and Christian zeal.
(*Speaks.*) Yes; then
We were betrothed. I wore his mother's ring,—
And Willie joined the church; before all men
He made the promises and vows which bring
A blessing down from God. Dear lady, strength
From Heaven came to us. Could I endure
This absence, silence, all the weary length
Of hours and days and months, were I not sure
That God was with my Willie? If on you
Sorrow has fallen, lady (and those tears
Showed me its presence), seek the good, the true,
In this sad life; a prayer can calm all fears;
Yield all your troubles to your God's control,

And He will bless you. Ah! where should *I* be
Did I not know that in my Willie's soul
Came first the love of God, then love for me?

THE LADY.

His love for you comes *second?*

THE MAIDEN.

Would you have
A mortal love come first!

THE LADY.

Sweet heart, I crave
Your pardon. For your gentle Christian zeal
I thank you. Wear this gem—'twill make me feel
That I am something to you when we part.
But what the "silence?"

THE MAIDEN.

Ten months (they seem years!)
Since Willie joined the army; and my heart
Bore it until his letters ceased; then tears
Would come—would come!

THE LADY.

Why should the letters cease?

THE MAIDEN.

I know not; I could only pray for peace,
And his return. No doubt he could not write,
Perplexed with many duties; his the care
Of a thronged camp, where, ever in his sight,
The new recruits are drilled.

THE LADY (*thinking*).

Oh, faith most rare!
(*Speaks.*) Had you no doubts?

THE MAIDEN.

Why should I doubt? We are
Betrothed—the same forever, near or far!
—He knew my trust
Was boundless as his own.

THE LADY.

But still you must
In reason have known something—must have heard
Or else imagined—

THE MAIDEN.

For three months no word
Until this letter; from its page I learned
That my poor Willie had but just returned

To the brigade, when struck down unaware.
It seems he had been three months absent.

THE LADY.

—Where?

THE MAIDEN.

They did not say. I hope to bear him home
To-morrow; for in truth I scarce could come,
So ill my mother, and so full my hands
Of household cares; but, Willie understands.

THE LADY (*thinking*).

Ciel! faith like this is senseless—or sublime!
Which is it?
(*Speaks*). But three months—so long a time—

THE MAIDEN.

Were it three years, 'twould be the same. The troth
We plighted, freely, lovingly, from both
Our true hearts came.

THE LADY (*thinking*).

And may as freely go—
Such things have happened! But I will not show
One glimpse of doubt to mar the simple trust
She cherishes; as soon my hand could thrust
A knife in the dove's breast.

(*Speaks.*) You'll find him, dear;
All will go well; take courage. Not severe
His wound?

THE MAIDEN.

Not unto death; but fever bound
His senses. When the troops moved on, they found
A kindly woman near by Benton's Mill;
And there he lies, poor Willie, up above
In her small loft, calling, in tones that thrill:
"Oh, come to me, my love, my love, my love!"—
Here is his picture.

THE LADY.

What! 'tis Meredith!
The girl is mad!—Give it me forthwith!
How came you by it?

THE MAIDEN.

Madam, you will break
The chain. I beg—

THE LADY.

Here is some strange mistake.
This picture shows me Meredith Reid.

THE MAIDEN.

Yes, Reid
Is Willie's name; and Meredith, indeed,

Is his name also—Meredith Wilmer. I
Like not long names, so gave him, lovingly,
The pet name Willie.

THE LADY.

O ye Powers above!
The "pet name Willie!" Would you try to chain
Phœbus Apollo with your baby-love
And baby-titles? Scarce can I refrain
My hands from crushing you!—
You are that girl,
Then, the boy's fancy. Yes, I heard the tale
He tried to tell me; but it was so old,
So very old! I stopped him with a curl
Laid playfully across his lips. "Nay, hold!
Enough, enough," I said; "of what avail
The rest? I know it all; 'tis e'er the same
Old story of the country lad's first flame
That burns the stubble out. Now by this spell
Forget it all." He did; and it was well
He did.

THE MAIDEN.

Never! oh, never! Though you prove
The whole as clear as light, I'd ne'er receive
One word. As in my life, so I believe
In Willie!

THE LADY.

Fool and blind! your God above
Knows that I lie not when I say that he
You dwarf with your weak names is mine, mine, mine!
He worships me—dost hear? He worships *me*,
Me only! What art thou, a feeble child,
That *thou* shouldst speak of loving? Haste, aside,
Lest we should drown you in the torrent wild
Of our strong meeting loves, that may not bide
Nor know your dying, even; feeble weed
Tossed on the shore— [*The maiden faints.*
Why could I not divine
The truth at first? [*Fans her.*
Fierce love, why shouldst thou kill
This little one? The child hath done no ill,
Poor wounded, broken blossom. I should pour
My gentlest pity—

THE MAIDEN (*recovering*).

Madam, thanks; no more
Do I require your aid.

THE LADY (*aside*).

How calm she seems,
How cold her far-off eyes! Poor little heart.
The pity of it! all its happy dreams,

With a whole life's idolatry to part
In one short moment.
(*Speaks.*) Child, let us be friends;
Not ours the fault, it is the work of Fate.
And now, before your hapless journey ends,
Say, in sweet charity, you do not hate
Me for my love. Trust me, I'll tend him well;
As mine own heart's blood, will I care for him
Till strong again. Then shall he come and tell
The whole to you—the cup from dregs to brim—
How, with undoubting faith
In the young fancy that he thought was love
For you, he came a-down the glittering path
Of Washington society; above
The throng I saw his noble Saxon head,
Sunny with curls, towering among the rest
In calm security—scorn that is bred
Of virtue, and that largeness which your West
With its wide sweep of fields gives to her sons—
A certain careless largeness in the look,
As though a thousand prairie-miles it took
Within its easy range.
Ah! blindly runs
Our fate. We met, we two so far apart
In every thought, in life, in soul, in heart—
Our very beings clashed. He, fair, severe;

I, dark and free; his days a routine clear,
Lighted by conscience; I, in waking dream
Of colors, music, warmth, the scents of flowers,
The sweep of velvet, and the diamond's gleam,
A cloud of romance heavy on the air,
The boudoir curtained from the light of day,
Where all the highest came to call me fair,
And whispered vows I laughed in scorn away.
Was it my fault that Nature chose to give
The splendid beauty of this hair, these eyes,
This creamy skin? And if the golden prize
Of fortune came to me, should I not live
In the rich luxury my being craved?
I give my word, I no more thought of time—
Whether 'twas squandered, trifled with, or saved,
Than the red rose in all her damask prime.
Each day I filled with joys full to the brim—
The rarest fruits and wines, the costliest lace,
The ecstasy of music, every whim
For some new folly gratified, the grace
Of statues idealized in niches, touch
Of softest fabrics. Ah! the world holds much
For those who love her; and I never heard
In all my happy glowing life one word
Against her, till—he came!

We met, we loved,

Like flash of lightning from a cloudless sky,
So sudden, strange, the white intensity—
Intensity resistless! Swift there moved
Within his heart a force unknown before,
That swept his being from that early faith
Across a sea, and cast it on the shore
Prone at my feet.
He minded not if death
Came, so he could but gaze upon my face.

—But, bending where he lay (the youthful grace
Of his strong manhood, in humility
Prone, by love's lightnings), so I bended me
Down to his lips, and gave him—all!
Sweet girl,
Forgive me for the guiltless robbery,
Forgive him, swept by fateful Destiny!
He spoke of one, the child-love of his youth;
I told of my child-marriage. But, in truth,
No barrier, had it been a thousand-fold
Stronger than boyish promise, e'er could hold
Natures like ours!
You see it, do you not?
You understand it all.
—I had forgot,
But this the half-way town; the train runs slow,

No better place than this. But, ere you go,
Give me one silent hand-clasp, little pearl.
I ask you not to speak, for words would seem
Too hard, too hard. Yet, some time, when the dream
Of girlhood has dissolved before the heat
Of real love, you will forgive me, sweet.

THE MAIDEN.

I fail to comprehend you. Go? Go where?

THE LADY.

Back to your home; here waits the north-bound train;
'Twill bear you safely. To go on were pain
Most needless—cruel.

THE MAIDEN.

I am not aware
That I have said aught of returning. Vain
Your false and evil story. I have heard
Of such as you; but never, on my word
As lady and as Christian, did I think
To find myself thus side by side with one
Who flaunts her ignominy on the brink
Of dark perdition!
Ah! my Willie won
The strong heart's victory when he turned away
From your devices, as I *know* he turned.

Although you follow him in this array
Of sin, I *know* your evil smiles he spurned
With virtuous contempt—the son of prayers,
The young knight of the church! My bosom shares
His scorn; take back your ring, false woman. Go!
Move from my side.

THE LADY.

Dear Heaven, now I know
How pitiless these Christians!
Unfledged girl,
Your little, narrow, pharisaic pride
Deserves no pity; jealousy's wild whirl
Excuse might be, since that is born of love;
But *this* is scorn, and, by the God above,
I'll set you in your place!
Do *you* decide
The right and wrong for this broad world of ours,
Poor little country-child, whose feeble eyes
Veiled o'er with prejudice are yet so wise
That they must judge the earth, and call it good
Or evil as it follows their small rules,
The petty, narrow dogmas of the schools
That hang on Calvin!
Doubtless prairie-flowers
Esteem the hot-house roses evil all;

But yet I think not that the roses should
Go into mourning therefor!
Oh, the small,
Most small foundation for a vast conceit!
Is it a merit that you never learned
But one side of this life? Because you dwelt
Down in a dell, there were no uplands sweet,
No breezy mountain-tops? *You* never yearned
For freedom, born a slave! You never felt
The thrill of rapture, the wild ecstasy
Of mere existence that strong natures know,
The deep and long-drawn breaths, the burning glow
Of blood that sunward leaps; but, in your dell,
You said: "This is the world. If all, like me,
Walked on this one straight line, all would go well!"
O fool! O blind!
O little ant toiling along the ground!
You cannot see the eagle on the wind
Soaring aloft; and so you go your round
And measure out the earth with your small line,
An inch for all infinity! "Thus mine
Doth make the measure; thus it is."
Proud girl!
You call me evil. There is not a curl
In all this loosened hair which is not free
From sin as your smooth locks. Turn; look at me!

I flout you with my beauty! From my youth
Beside my mother's chair, by God's own truth,
I've led a life as sinless as your own.
Your innocence is ignorance; but I
Have seen the Tempter on his shining throne,
And said him nay. You craven weaklings die
From fear of dangers I have faced! I hold
Those lives far nobler that contend and win
The close, hard fight with beautiful, fierce Sin,
Than those that go untempted to their graves,
Deeming the ignorance that haply saves
Their souls, some splendid wisdom of their own!
You fold
Yourself in scornful silence? I could smile,
O childish heart, so free from worldly guile,
Were I not angered by your littleness.
You judge my dress
The garb of sin? Listen. I sat and heard
The opera; by chance there fell a word
Behind me from a group of men who fill
Night after night my box. My heart stood still.
I asked—they told the name. "Wounded," they said,
"A letter in the journal here." I read,
Faced them with level eyes; they did not know,
But wondered, caught the truth, to see me go

Straight to my carriage. " Drive! The midnight train."
We reached it, breathless.
Had I worn fair white,
A ballroom-robe, I'd do the same to gain
One moment more of time.

THE MAIDEN.

And by what right—
Are you his wife?

THE LADY.

I am not; but to-night
I shall be, if I live. Your scorn, poor child,
Is thrown away. Bound by his soldier's oath,
I would not keep him. No Omphale I,
Though he be Hercules. We plighted troth,
And then, when called, he went from me—to die
If need be. I remember that I smiled
When they marched by!
Love for my country burns
Within my heart; but this was love for him.
I could not brook him, one who backward turns
For loving wife; his passion must not dim
The soldier's courage stern. Then I had wealth,
The golden wealth left me by that old man
Who called me wife for four short months; by stealth
He won me, but a child; the quiet plan

Was deftly laid. I do not blame him now.
My mother dead—one kind thought was to save
My budding youth from harm. The thoughtless vow
I made was soon dissevered by the grave,
And I was left alone. Since then I've breathed
All pleasures as the flowers breathe in the sun,
At heart as innocent as they; red-wreathed
My careless life with roses, till the one
Came! Then the red turned purple deep, the hope
Found itself love; the rose was heliotrope.
There needed much
To do with lawyers' pens ere I could give
My hand again; so that dear, longed-for touch
Was set by me for the full-blooming day
When Peace shall drive the demon War away
Forever. I was wrong. Oh, let him live,
Kind God! Love shall be wronged no more—no more.
All my own heart's life will I gladly pour
For one small hour of his.—Wait—wait—I fly
To thee, my love, on swiftest wings! Thy cry
The depths of grief too hot for tears doth move:
"Oh, come to me, my love, my love, my love!"

THE MAIDEN.

It was not you he called!

THE LADY.

Ah! yes.

THE MAIDEN.

He is
Not false; I'll ne'er believe it, woman.

THE LADY.

His
The falseness of the pine-tree, felled, uptorn
By the great flood, and onward madly borne
With the wild, foaming torrent miles away.—
No doubt he loved the violet that grew
In the still woods ere the floods came; he knew
Not then of roses!

THE MAIDEN.

Cruel eyes, I say
But this to all your flashings—you have lied
To me in all!

THE LADY.

Look, then, here at my side
His letters—read them. Did he love me? Read!
Aha! you flush, you tremble, there's no need
To show you more; the strong words blanch your cheek.
See, here his picture; could I make it speak,
How it would kill you! Yes, I wear it there

Close to my heart. Know you this golden hair
That lies beside it?

THE MAIDEN.

Should he now confess
The whole—yes, tell me all your tale was true,
I would not leave him to you, sorceress!
I'd snatch him from the burning—I would sue
His pardon down from heaven. I shall win
Him yet, false woman, and his grievous sin
Shall be forgiven.
(*Bows her head upon her hands.*) O God let him die
Rather than live for one who doth belie
All I have learned of Thee!

Train stops suddenly.—Enter CONDUCTOR.

CONDUCTOR.

The bridge is down,
The train can go no farther. Morgan's band
Were here last night! There is a little town
Off on the right, and there, I understand,
You ladies can find horses. Benton's Mill
Is but a short drive from Waunona Hill.—
Can I assist you?

THE MAIDEN.

Thanks; I must not wait. [*Exit.*

THE LADY.

Yes; that my basket—that my shawl. O Fate!
How burdened are we women! Sir, you are
Most kind; and may I trouble you thus far?
Find me the fleetest horses; I must reach
Waunona Hill this night. I do beseech
All haste; a thousand dollars will I give
For this one ride. [*Exeunt.*

A SOLDIER.

Say, boys, I'd like to live
Where I could see that woman! I could fight
A regiment of rebels in her sight—
Couldn't you?

THE OTHERS.

Yes—yes! [*Exeunt omnes.*

THE DRIVE.

THE LADY (*thinking*).

O FAIR Kentucky! border-land of war,
Thou rovest like a gypsy at thy will
Between the angry South and stubborn North.

Across thy boundaries many times from far
Sweep Morgan's men, the troopers bold who fill
Ohio with alarm; then, marching forth
In well-drilled ranks with flag, and fife, and drum,
From camp and town the steady blue-coats come,
March east, march west, march north, march south,
and find
No enemy except the lawless wind.
No sooner gone—Lo! presto through the glen
Is heard the midnight ride of Morgan's men:
They ford the rivers by the light of stars,
The ringing hoofs sound through the mountain-pass;
They draw not rein until their glad huzzas
Are echoing through the land of the Blue Grass.
—O lovely land,
O swell of grassy billows far and near,
O wild, free elms, whose swaying arms expand
As if to clasp me, hold my love as dear
As thine own son! I hasten to his side—
Ye roads, lie smooth; ye streams, make safe the ford;
O chivalrous Kentucky, help the bride
Though thou hast wounded with thy rebel sword
The foeman bridegroom!

. . . . . .

. . . . Can it be that girl
Who rides in front? I thought her left behind

In that small town. *Ciel!* would I could hurl
The slim thing down this bank! Would I could
bind
Those prim, long-fingered, proper hands of hers
Behind her drooping, narrow-shouldered back,
And send her home! A heart like that transfers
Its measured, pale affections readily,
If the small rules it calleth piety
Step in between them. Otherwise, the crack
Of doom would not avail to break the cord
Which is not love so much as given word
And fealty, that conscientiousness
Which weigheth all things be they more or less,
From fold of ribbon to a marriage-vow,
With self-same scales of duty. Shall I now
Ride on and pass her—for her horse will fail
Before the hour is out? Of what avail
Her journey?
(*Speaks.*) Driver, press forward.—Nay, stop—
(*Aside.*) O what a child am I to waver thus!
I know not how to be ungenerous,
Though I may try—God knows I truly tried.
What's this upon my hand? Did a tear drop?
(*Speaks.*) By your side
Behold me, maiden; will you ride with me?
My horses fleet and strong.

THE MAIDEN.

I thank you—no.

THE LADY (*aside*).

She said me nay; then why am I not free
To leave her here, and let my swift steeds go
On like the wind?
(*Speaks.*) Ho! driver—
(*Aside.*) But, alas!
I cannot.
(*Speaks.*) Child, my horses soon will pass
In spite of me; they are so fleet they need
The curb to check them in their flying speed.
Ours the same journey: why should we not ride
Together?

THE MAIDEN.

Never!

THE LADY.

Then I must abide
By your decision.—Driver, pass.
(*Thinking.*) I take
Her at her word. In truth, for her own sake
'Twere charity to leave her, hasten on,
Find my own love, and with him swift be gone
Ere she can reach him; for his ardor strong

(Curbed, loyal heart, so long!),
Heightened by fever, will o'ersweep all bounds,
And fall around me in a fiery shower
Of passion's words.— And yet—this inner power—
This strange, unloving justice that surrounds
My careless conscience, *will* not let me go!
(*Speaks.*) Ho!
Driver, turn back.
—Maiden, I ask again—
I cannot take advantage. Come with me;
That horse will fail you soon—ask; both these men
Will tell you so.—Come, child—we will agree
The ride shall count as naught; nay, when we reach
The farm-house, all shall be as though no speech
Had ever passed between us—we will meet
Beside his couch as strangers.
(*Speaks.*) There's defeat
For thee, O whispering tempter!

THE MAIDEN (*to the men*).

Is it true?
Will the horse fail?

ONE OF THE MEN.

Yes.

THE MAIDEN.

Madam, then with you
I needs must ride.—I pray you take my share
Of payment; it were more than I could bear
To be indebted to you.

THE LADY.

Nay—the sum
Was but a trifle.
(*Aside.*) Now forgive me, truth.
But was it not a trifle to such wealth—
Such wealth as mine?
(*Speaks.*) Heard you that distant drum
Borne on the wind a moment? Ah! our youth
Is thrilled with the great pulses of this war.
How fast we live—how full each crowded hour
Of hot excitements! Naught is done by stealth,
The little secrecies of other days
Thrown to the winds; the clang and charge afar
On the red battle-field, the news that sways
Now to, now fro, 'twixt victory and defeat;
The distant cry of "Extra!" down the street
In the gray dawnings, and our breathless haste
To read the tidings—all this mighty power
Hath burned in flame the day of little things,

Curled like a scroll—and now we face the kings,
The terrible, the glorious gods of war.
—The maid forgets her shyness; wherefore waste
One moment when the next may call him forth
Ne'er to return to her? The dear old North
May take her lover—but he shall not go
With lips unkissed to meet his Southern foe;
Her last embrace will cheer him on his round
Now back, now forth, over the frozen ground
Through the long night.
—And when the hasty word
"Only one day; be ready, love," is heard,
The soft consent is instant, and there swells
Amid the cannonade faint wedding-bells
From distant village; then, as swift away
The soldier bridegroom rides—he may not stay.
And she?—She would not keep him, though the tears
Blind her sweet eyes that follow him, and fears
Crowd her faint heart and take away her breath,
As on her white robe falls the shade of Death
That waits for him at Shiloh!
O these days!
When we have all gone back to peaceful ways,
Shall we not find sweet Peace a little dull?
—You do not speak.

THE MAIDEN.

Madam, my heart is full
Of other thoughts.

THE LADY.

Of love?—Pray—what is love?
How should a woman love?—Although we hate
Each other well, we need not try to prove
Our hate by silence—for there is a fate
Against it in us women; speak we must,
And ever shall until we're turned to dust,
Nay—I'm not sure but even then we talk
From grave to grave under the churchyard-walk—
Whose bones last longest—whose the finest shroud—
And—is there not a most unseemly crowd
In pauper's corner yonder?
—You are shocked?
You do not see, then, that I only mocked
At my own fears—as those poor French lads sang
Their gayest songs at the red barricade,
Clear on the air their boyish voices rang
In chorus, even while the bayonet made
An end of them.—He may be suffering now—
He may be calling—
There! I've made a vow
To keep on talking. So, then—tell me, pray,
How should a woman love?

THE MAIDEN.

I can but say
How I do love.

THE LADY.

And how?

THE MAIDEN.

With faith and prayer.

THE LADY.

I, too; my faith is absolute. We share
That good in common. I believe his love
Is great as mine, and mine—oh, could I prove
My love by dying for him, far too small
The test; I'd give my love, my soul, my all,
In life, in death, in immortality,
Content in hell itself (if there be hells—
Which much I doubt)—content, so I could be
With him!

THE MAIDEN.

Is it a woman's tongue that tells
This blasphemy? When I said faith, I meant
A faith in God.

THE LADY.

And God is love! He sent
This love that fills my heart. Oh, most divine—
Oh, nearest to him of all earthly things,

A love that passeth self—a love like mine
That passeth understanding. The bird sings
Because it is the only way he knows
To praise his Maker; and a love that flows
Like mine is worship, too—a hymn that rolls
Up to the God of Love, who gave us souls
To love with. Then the hidden sacrifice;
It formed a part of worship once, and I
Do hold it now the part that deepest lies
In woman's love, the dim sanctuary
Behind the veil, holy of holies, kept
E'en from the one she loves: all told, except
This mystic feeling which she may not know
How to express in words—the martyr's glow
Idealized—the wish to give him joy
Through her own suffering, and so destroy
All part that self might play—to offer pure
Her love to her heart's idol. Strange, obscure,
Sacred, but mighty, is this longing; I
Can feel though not define it. I would die
To make him happy!

THE MAIDEN.

As his happiness
Depends on me, then can you do no less
Than yield him to me—if you love him thus.

THE LADY (*thinking*).

" As," said she? Heart, but this is fabulous,
This calm security of hers!
(*Speaks.*) Why, child,
Hast never heard of passion, and its wild,
Impetuous, unreasoning assault
On souls that know not their own depths? The fault
Not his: he was but young, he did not know
Himself. Might he not love me even though
Thou wert the best? Have pity! I appeal
To all the woman in thee. Dost thou feel
That one touch of his hand would call the blood
Out from thy heart in an o'erwhelming flood
To meet it?

THE MAIDEN.

Nay, I know not what you speak.

THE LADY.

Thou dost not, that I see. Thy pearly cheek
Keeps its fair white.
Sweet child, he's that and more
To me. Ah, let me kneel; thus I implore
That thou wouldst yield him to me—all the right
His boyhood promise gave thee.

THE MAIDEN.

In the sight
Of Heaven we are betrothed; I cannot break
My word.

THE LADY.

Oh, not for mine, but for *his* sake!
He loves me!

THE MAIDEN.

Only madness, that will burn
And die to ashes; but, the fever past,
The old, pure love will steadfastly return
And take its rightful place.

THE LADY.

But should it last,
This fever-madness? should he ask your grace,
And say he loved me best?

THE MAIDEN.

Then, to his face
I'd answer, Never! What! leave him to sin?

THE LADY.

And what the sin?

THE MAIDEN.

You! you! You have no faith,

No creed, that I can learn. .The Bible saith
All such are evil.

THE LADY (*aside*).

Why did I begin
Such hopeless contest?
(*Speaks.*) Child, if he should lie
Before us now, and one said he must die
Or love me, wouldst thou yield?

THE MAIDEN.

Never; as dead
He would be in God's hands; living—

THE LADY.

In mine.

THE MAIDEN.

That is, in atheism.

THE LADY.

Have I said
Aught atheistical? Because my faith
Is broader than its own, this conscience saith
I am an atheist! Ah, child, is thine
A better faith? Yet, be it what it may,
Should he now lie before us here, and say
He loved thee best, I'd yield him though my heart

Should stop—though I should die. Yea, for his sake,
To make him happy, I would even take
Annihilation!—let the vital spark
Called soul be turned to nothing.

THE MAIDEN.

Far apart
Our motives; mine is clear with duty—

THE LADY.

Dark
And heavy mine with love.

THE MAIDEN.

You talk of death
With frequent phrase, as though a little thing,
A matter merely of the will and breath,
It were to face the judgment, and the King
Who has not summoned you. Your flippant tongue
Rolls out its offers as a song is sung,
And, both mean nothing; for the chance to die
For one we love, that glorious gift, comes now
But rarely in this life that you and I
Must bear our part in. Thus, no empty vow
Do *I* repeat; and yet, I surely know,
At duty's call right calmly could I go
Up the red scaffold's stairs.

THE LADY.

I well believe
Thee, steadfast maiden-voice. Nay, I conceive
My love, *thy* duty, are alike—the same
Self-sacrifice under a various name
According to our natures. I would yield,
And thou refuse to yield, from the same love;
I'd have him happy here, and thou—above.
For thus we look at life.
The book is sealed
That holds our fate—we may not look within;
But this I know, that, be it deadly sin
Or highest good, he loves me!

THE MAIDEN.

There are loves—
And loves!

THE LADY.

So be it. All this word-work proves
Nothing. Then let it end. Though there's a charm
In speech—but you are tired. 'Twill be no harm
To rest you on my shoulder, though its creed
(Poor shoulder!) is not orthodox.

THE MAIDEN.

Indeed,
I need not rest.

THE LADY.

Well, then, I'm half asleep
Myself, and you the silent watch may keep.—
(*Thinking.*) I've whiled the time away; but, thou dear
God,
Who made me, how with bleeding feet have trod
The toiling moments through my heart! I pray
(For I believe that prayer may aid the soul,
Though not the body nor the fixed control
Of Nature) that his love may hold its sway
E'en as I saw him last, when, at my feet,
He lavished his young heart in burning tide
Of loving words. Oh, not for mine own joy,
But his, I pray this prayer; do thou destroy
All my own part in it.—Ah, love, full sweet
Shall be our meeting. Lo! the longed-for bride
Comes—of her own accord. There is no bliss,
Even in heaven, greater than the kiss
That I do keep for thee!

THE MAIDEN (*thinking*).

O God, thy will
Be done—yes, first of all, be done! (Bide still,
Thou wicked, rebel heart!) Yet, O Lord, grant
This grace to me, a lowly supplicant.
My mind is vexèd, evil thoughts do rage

Within my soul; O Merciful, assuage
The suffering I endure!—If it is true
My poor boy loves this woman—and what is
Is ever for the best—create anew
Her soul that it may surely leaven his
With holiness. Oh, stretch Thy mighty arm
And win her to Thy fold, that she may be
A godly woman, graced with piety,
Turned from the error of her ways, the harm
Of all her worldliness, the sinful charm
Of her fair face (if it be fair, though I
Think her too brown) changed by humility
To decorous sweetness.—

Lord, look in my heart;
I may not know myself; search every part,
And give me grace to say that I will yield
My love to hers if Thy will stands revealed
In his swift preference.

Yet, in pity, hear—
Change her, Lord—make her good! [*Weeps.*

THE LADY (*thinking*).

Is that a tear
On her soft cheek? She has her little griefs,
Then, as the children have; their small beliefs

Are sometimes brought to naught—no fairies live,
And dolls are sawdust!—
Love, I do forgive
Your boyish fancy, for she's lily fair;
But no more could content you now than dew
Could hope to fill Niagara with its rare,
Fine drops that string the grass-blade's shining hue,
Upon the brink.—Dearest, I call! Oh, see
How all my being rushes toward thee! Wait,
E'en though before thine eyes bright heaven's gate
Let out its light: angels might envy thee
Such love as I shall give thee—wait! oh, wait!

THE FARM-HOUSE.

THE LADY.

THE sun is setting, we have passed the mill
Some time; the house is near Waunona Hill,
But the road smooth this way—which doth account
For the discrepancy of names. The gleam
Of the low sun shines out beneath that mass
Of purple thunder-cloud; when we surmount
This little swell of land, its slanting beam

Will light up all the lances of the grass,
The steely hue, the blue of the Blue Grass.
. . . . . .
That is the house off on the right; I know
By intuition.

THE MAIDEN.

It may hold—the worst!

THE LADY.

Art faint?

THE MAIDEN.

'Twill pass. Lady, I enter first—
First and alone!

THE LADY.

Child, if I thought his heart
Longed for the sight of you, I'd let you go;
Nay, I would make you! As it is—
But no,
It cannot be.

THE MAIDEN (*clasping her hands*).

Lord, give me strength! I yield;
Go you the first. Ah! [*Sobs.*

THE LADY.

Yours the nobler part;
I cannot yield. (And yet it is for him

I hold this "cannot" firm.) What might you wield
With that unflinching conscience-power! See, dim
Mine eyes—
There; we will go together—thus!
God help us both! [*They enter the house.*
Yes, we have come, we two,
His nearest, dearest. Is it perilous,
The fever? Where—above? That stair? We go—
Come, child—come, child.

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

Dear ladies, you should know
Before—

THE LADY.

Come!

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

He—

THE LADY.

Child, must I wait for you
Here at his door!

THE MAIDEN.

I come; but something cold
Has touched my heart.

THE LADY.

Then stay, coward!

THE MAIDEN.

Nay, hold;
I come. [*They mount the stairs together.*
(*Crying out above.*) But he is dead—my Willie!

THE LADY (*above*).

Fate,
You've gained the day at last! Yes, he is dead!

BY THE DEAD.

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

HE died last night at three—quite easily.

THE LADY.

Alone?

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

A surgeon from the camp was here.

THE LADY.

Where is the man?

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

Gone back.

THE LADY.

Send for him.

See,

Here is a trifle; though it cannot clear
Our debt to you, yet take it.

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

But you give

Too much.

THE LADY.

Keep it.

THE MAIDEN (*kneeling by the bedside*).

O Willie! can I live
Without you? Love, my love, why are you dead
And I alive? O noble, golden head,
Whose every curl I know, how still you lie
On this poor pillow, and how dreamlessly
You sleep! But waken now; look on me, dear;
Open those close-shut eyes, for I am here—

Yes, here all this long way from home. Oh, speak—
Speak to me, Willie.—Ah, how cold his cheek—
How icy cold! O God! he's dead, he's dead!

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

Yes, he is dead, dead as King David. Truth
He was right handsome for a Yankee youth—
Rode his horse well.

THE LADY (*aside*).

I love you, Meredith.

THE MAIDEN.

What's this upon the table near his hand?
[*Opens the package.*
My picture—yes, my letters—all! Herewith
I know—I know he loved me!

THE LADY (*thinking*).

Cover worn,
Creased in its folds, unopened, and forlorn—
Yes, I remember it. I would not look
Within;—unopened since that day.
He took
The poor thing forth with dying loyalty
To send to her.

THE MAIDEN.

O Lord, I understand
Thy purpose; 'twas to try my faith. I kneel
To thank thee that mercy doth reveal
The whole to my poor heart. He loved me—me,
Me only!

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.

Would you like to see the wound
Here in his arm?—Why, if she hasn't swooned!

THE LADY.

Take her below, and care for her, poor child!

[*Exit woman, carrying the maiden in her arms.*

Brain, art thou wild,
Distraught, that thou canst all things calmly hear
And answer, when my pulses reel, my heart
Stands still, and cold through every vital part
Death breathes his icy breath?

Oh, my own love!
I clasp thee in my arms, come back to me!
O ice-cold lips I kiss, ye are as dear
As ever! Come! Thy idol waits for thee,
Waits—weeps.

Dost thou not hear me there above
Where thou hast gone? Come back and take the bride
Who nestles weeping, longing, at the side

Of thy deserted body. Oh! most fair
Thy earthly tenement, the golden hair
Curls as when my poor fingers twined it last,
Thy head upon my breast. O brownèd cheek!
Can I not warm thee with mine own? Oh, speak—
Speak to me, Meredith!
Poor wounded arm,
Dear blood; here will I hold thee close and warm
Upon my heart. Dost thou not feel me now?
And now? And now? Do I not hold thee fast?
Hast thou not longed for me?
I gave my vow
To be thine own. See! I am come. My hand
I lay in thine. Oh, speak to me! Command
My every breath; full humbly I obey,
The true wife longs to feel a master's sway,
Longs to do homage, so her idol prove
Ruler—nay, despot of her willing love.
Didst thou not hear me whisper while she spake.
"I love thee—oh, I love thee, Meredith?"
I would not that her childish grief should break
Thy peace up in thy heaven; even there
Thou longest for my love, and near the stair
Where souls come up from earth thou'rt standing now
Watching for me. O darling, from thy brow
I catch the radiance!

She is not thine,
Thou art not hers. The boyish pledge wherewith
She strives to hold thee was the radiancy
Of early dawn, which now the mighty sun
Hath swept away in fervent heat; nor thee
Nor her it binds. Her pretty youth will run
Its swift course to some other love; Fate
Ne'er lets such sweet maids pine, though they may try;
A few months lent to tearful constancy,
The next to chastened sorrow, slow decline
To resignation; then, the well-masked bait
Of making some one happy, though at cost
Of sweet self-sacrifice, which soon is lost
In that content which, if not real love,
Looks strangely like it! But why should I prove
What thou dost know already, freed from time
And finite bonds, my darling?
Love sublime,
Art thou not God? Then let him down to me
For one short moment. See! in agony
I cling to the cold body; let him touch
Me once with this dear hand; it is not much
I ask—one clasp, one word.
What! nothing? Then
I call down vengeance on this God of men

Who makes us at his will, and gives us hearts
Only to rend them in a hundred parts,
And see them quiver—bleed! I, creature, dare
To call aloud for justice; my despair
Our great far-off Creator doth arraign
Before the bar to answer for the pain
I suffer now. It is too much—too much!
O woe! woe! woe! the human soul can such
Intensity of sorrow not withstand,
But, lifting up on high its fettered hand,
Can only cry aloud in agony,
And blindly, wildly curse its God and die!
How dare you take,
You Death, my love away from me? The old,
The weak, the loveless, the forlorn, were there
In crowds, and none to miss them. But your cold
And heartless eye did mark that he was fair,
And that I loved him? From your dreadful hold
I snatch my darling, and he yet shall wake
From out your sleep by my caresses. See,
See how I love him! Ah, shall I not win
His life back with my lips, that lovingly
Do cling to his? And, though you do begin
Your icy work, these arms shall keep him warm—
Nay, more: my loving verily disarm

E'en you, O King of Terrors! You shall turn
And give him back to me; a heart shall burn
Under your ribs at last from very sight
Of my fierce, tearless grief.
—O sorry plight
Of my poor darling in this barren room,
Where only his gold curls do light the gloom!
But we will change all that. This evening, dear,
Shall be our bridal: wilt thou take me, here,
And thus?—in this array—this falling hair—
Crushed robes? And yet, believe me, I am fair
As ever.
Love, love, love! oh, speak to me!
I will not listen in my misery
If thy heart beat—
God! it is cold!
[*Falls to the floor.*

Enter the SURGEON.

SURGEON.
Art ill,
Madam?—

THE LADY (*rising*).
Thanks, sir. But sorrow cannot kill.
Would that it could! Nay, I sit by his side—
Thus. Now tell all—all—all.

SURGEON.

You cannot hide
The deadly faintness that has paled your cheek;
Let me get—

THE LADY.

Nothing. Nothing can avail,
Good sir; my very heart's blood has turned pale.
Struck by God's lightning, do you talk to me
Of faintness? Only tell your tale—speak, speak;
You saw him die?

SURGEON.

I did; right tranquilly
He passed away this morning, with your name
Upon his lips—for you are Helena?

THE LADY.

I am.

SURGEON.

I saw your picture.
(*Aside.*) Yes, the same.
Hair, eyes. What Titian tints!
(*Speaks.*) He made me lay
Your letters and your picture on his heart
Before he died; he would not from them part
For e'en one moment.

THE LADY.

Lift them not, they're mine;
My hand alone must touch the holy shrine
Of love and death where the poor relics lie—
Darling (*bends, and kisses the letters*), because you loved
them!
Let them die,
Go to the grave with him, there on his breast,
Where I would gladly die too—be at rest
Forever.—And he spake of me?

SURGEON.

He said
That you would come, for he had sent you word.

THE LADY.

I ne'er received it; 'twas by chance I heard,
A passing chance.

SURGEON.

The lines were down—

THE LADY.

And may
They never rise again that failed that day,
And left him dying here! Go on; he said—

SURGEON.

That you would come, and grieved that o'er his head
The turf might close ere you could reach his side
And give him one last kiss.

And then—he died.

THE LADY.

No more?

SURGEON.

No more. Ah, yes, one other thing:
Short time before, he feebly bade me bring
That package on the table—but 'tis torn—
Some one has opened it! It looked well worn,
In old, unbroken foldings when I brought
It from his satchel. Who could thus have wrought
On other's property?

THE LADY.

The owner.—Then
He said—

SURGEON.

To give it you, for you would know
Its history, and where it swift should go;
The name was writ within.

THE LADY (*aside*).

Yes, love; amen!
Be it according to thy wish.

(*Speaks.*) Pray take
This fee, good sir. I would that for his sake—
Your kindness to him—I could send your name
Ringing through all the West in silver fame.—
At dawn, you said, the burial? Then leave
Me here alone with him. I well believe
You'll show me further kindness. Speak no word
Beyond your doctor's art to that poor child
Who weeps below. I would not that she heard
Aught more of grief.

[*Exit* SURGEON.

Ah! all my passion wild
Has gone; now come the softening woman tears.—
Forgive me, great Creator, that I spake
In my sharp agony. O do thou take
The bitterness from out my soul; I know
Naught, but thou knowest all! Then let my woe,
The poor blind woe we short-lived mortals bear,
Be my sad plea.—
I knew, through my despair,
You loved me to the last. Death had no fears
For you, my love; you met him with my name,
As talisman of the undying flame
That leaps o'er the black chasm of the grave
And mounts to heaven. But I will not rave,
When you died softly.

Ah! you love me there
As well as here. God never made me fair
For nothing; now, I know the gift he gave
That I might take my place with you at last,
Equal in loveliness, though years had passed
Since you first breathed the air above the skies,
The beauty-giving air of paradise.
Fair are you now, my love, but not like me:
Mine is the goddess-bloom, the rarity
Of perfect loveliness; yours, the bright charm
Of strong young manhood, whose encircling arm
Could bend me like a reed. Oh, for one clasp
Of that strong arm!—
Hist! was not that the hasp
Of the old door below? She comes; I hear
Her light step on the stair.
Darling, no fear
Need trouble you upon your couch; to me
A sacred trust this gentle girl shall be
Through life. Did you not love her once?

THE MAIDEN (*entering*).

I pray
Forgiveness thus to leave you here so long;
I did not mean it, but I swooned away
Before I knew it.

THE LADY.

Thanks. There was no wrong;
I liked the vigil.

THE MAIDEN (*going to the bedside*).

Sweet those eyes—the brow
How calm! I would not bring life to him now
E'en if I could; gone to his God—at rest
From all earth's toil.
Dear love, upon thy breast
I lay my hand; I yield thee back to Him
Who gave thee to me; and, if thou hast wrought
Wrong to our troth in deed, or word, or thought,
I now forgive thee. Sleep in peace; the dim,
Dark grave has its awaking.
As the hart
Longed for the water-brooks, so have I yearned
For token, Willie, that thy love returned
To me at last. Lo! now I can depart
In peace.—My picture, letters! Thou wast true,
Wast true to me, thank God!—
(*Turning.*) Madam, to you
I owe apology.

THE LADY.

Never! But throw

Your gentle arms around me—thus. And so
Give me a blessing.

THE MAIDEN.

But I've robbed you—you
Who loved him also; though to me was due
This love of his; at least—

THE LADY.

Sweet doubter, yes;
I grant thee all. But, as I kneel, O bless
This heart that bows before thee; all its sin—
If it be sin—forgive; and take, within
Thy pure love, me, thy sister, who must live
Long years—long years! O child, who dost forgive
More than thou knowest, lay thy sister-hand
In blessing!

THE MAIDEN.

Though I do not understand,
Yet will I thus content thee: Now the Lord
Bless thee, and keep thee by his holy word;
Be gracious to thee, that thy faith increase;
Lift up his countenance, and give thee peace,
Now and forever!

THE LADY.

Amen. May it prove—
This peace—what thou dost think it.

THE MAIDEN.

I must go;
The horses wait for me. Now that I know
He's safe with God, the living claim my care.—
My mother—ah, full selfish was the love
That made me leave her so; I could despair
Of mine own self, if God were not so good,
Long-suffering, and kind.
O could I stay!
But I must reach the train at break of day.
I take my letters and the picture.—Should
Your duties call you not so soon, oh wait,
See his dear head laid low by careful hand,
And say a prayer above the grave.

THE LADY (*aside*).

O Fate,
How doth she innocently torture—rack
My soul with hard realities! I stand
And hear her talk of graves!—O God, the black,
Damp earth over my darling!

THE MAIDEN (*turning to the bedside*).

Love, farewell!
I kiss thee once.—Lady, you do not mind?
It was but once. I would not seem unkind;
I would not wound you needlessly.

THE LADY (*aside*).

O swell,
Proud heart, to bursting, but gainsay her not!

THE MAIDEN.

I know full well that yours the harder lot,
Dear lady; but, forgive me, he was mine
Long, long before. It were too much to ask
That I should not be glad his heart returned
To me, his bride betrothed—to know he yearned
For me before he died. I cannot mask
My joy because you loved him too.

THE LADY.

Nay, thine
All joy that thou canst take; I would not rob
Thee of one little hair's-breadth.

THE MAIDEN (*laying her head on the pillow*).

Oh, farewell,
My love! my love! my love! . [*Weeps.*

THE LADY.

Child, do not sob.
Come to me—let me hold you; who can tell,
Perhaps he hears you, though so still. We'll stand

Together by his side—thus, hand-in-hand—
And gaze on his calm face.

WOMAN OF THE HOUSE (*below*).

The wagon's here.

THE MAIDEN.

Alas! and I must hasten. Kiss me, dear;
Indeed, I love you now.

THE LADY.

And I have tried
To make you. [*They embrace.—Exit* MAIDEN.

THE LADY (*throwing herself down beside the body*).

Meredith, art satisfied?

EARTH TO EARTH.

WRAPPED in his cloak, they bore him forth at dawn,
The soldier dead, dead in his gallant strength,
Young manhood's prime. The heavy fold withdrawn
Showed his calm face, while all his rigid length
Lay stiff beneath the covering, the feet

Turned up to heaven like marble. Breezes played
Soft in his curling hair, the fragrance sweet
Of the wild-brier roses incense made,
And one bird sang a chant.
Yet recks it not,
This quiet body going to its grave,
Feet foremost, folded hands, if the storm rave
Or the sun shine. Henceforth nor part nor lot
Hath it with men—the tale is told, all's o'er;
Its place shall know its step, its voice, no more;
Its memory shall pass away; its name,
For all its evil or for all its worth,
Whether bedecked with reverence or blame,
Shall soon be clean forgotten.—
Earth to earth!

The lady walked alone. Her glorious hair
Still held its roses crushed; the chill despair
That numbed her being could not dim the light
Of all her flashing jewels, nor the bright
Sheen of her draperies.
The summer sun
Rose in the east and showed the open grave
Close at her feet; but, ere the work begun—
Lowering the clay (O proud humanity!
Is this thy end?)—she gentle signal gave

To lay the body down, and, by its side
Kneeling, kissed brow and lips, fondly as bride
Might kiss; and, as she clung there, secretly
A shining ring left on the cold dead hand,
And covered it from view; then slowly rose
And gave them place.
But ere the tightening rope
Had done its duty, o'er the eastern slope
Rode horsemen, and the little group of those
Who gazed, drew back, and eyed askance the band.
They turned, they drew their reins—a sight to see
Indeed, this lady clad so royally,
Alone, beside a grave.
She raised her eyes,
And the bold leader bared his lofty head
Before her to his saddle-bow; the guise
Of bold, rough-riding trooper could not hide
The gallant grace that thus its homage paid
To so much beauty. At his signal mute,
The little band, Kentucky's secret pride,
His daring followers in many a raid
And many a hair-breadth 'scape, made swift salute,
And, all dismounting, honor to the dead
Paid silently, not knowing 'twas their own
Bullet by night that laid him there:—so strange
The riddle of men's life, its little range

Thick with crossed fates, though each one stands alone
To mortal eyes.
The rope slackened, the clay
Had reached its final resting-place. Then she
Who loved him best, in all her rich array
Stepped forth, and, kneeling, with her own hands cast
The first clod on his heart. "I yield to thee,
Nature, my only love. Oh, hold him fast
As sacred trust!
'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust!'"
Then, rising, with her lovely face upturned
To the clear sky, where the first sunbeams burned,
"I know that my Redeemer lives," she said;
"He that believes on him, though he were dead,
Yet shall he live!"
And so passed from their sight.

The troopers ride away,
On to the south; the men who fill the grave
With hurried shovelfuls in whispers say,
"That's part of Morgan's band." And one, a slave,
Looks down the road, and mutters: "That was him—
Young Cap'en Morgan's self! These eyes is dim,
But they knows Morgan! Morgan!—what! why, bless
Your hearts, *I* know him, and I know Black Bess—
'Twas Bess he rode."

And now the work is done;
On from their northern raid the troopers pass
Fleet to the south; the grave is filled, and gone
Even the slave.
Forever still, alone,
Her letters and bright picture on his breast,
Her sparkling spousal-ring on his dead hand,
The golden-haired young soldier lies at rest
Where o'er his head the steely shadows pass,
Far in the fair Kentucky border-land,
The lovely, rolling land of the Blue Grass.

1864.

WASHINGTON.

THE LADY (*with an open letter*).

MARRIED! Nay, now the little vexing fear
That troubled the calm hollow of my grief
With its small aching is withdrawn, and clear
The certainty—she never loved him. Brief
Her forgetting—brief!—But I will not chide;

All happiness go with thee, gentle bride,
And of my gold a sister's share!
To wed
Another, and once his! O golden head
Under the grass, how jealous is my heart
Of thy remembrance! Yet I should be glad
She loved thee not, for then no evil part
I played, e'en though unconsciously.
Oh, mad,
Mad, mad my love for thee! the same to-day—
The same, the same. I could not be a wife—
I could not stop the sun! No love but thee,
My own, my own! no kiss but thine—no voice
To call me those sweet names that memory
Brings back with tears. Ah! had I any choice,
I still must love thee down beneath the sod
More than all else—though grandest soul that God
Had ever made did woo me. Love, my heart
Is thine, and ever must be thine; thy name
Is branded there!
Yet must I live my life.

SERVANT (*announcing*).

The Count.

THE LADY.

Another? Ah! poor fools. The game

Doth while away my time. Yes, I do play
My part with smiles that are not wholly feigned,
For life is strong, and I am young.—There reigned
A queen once, who, though dead, could not lay
down
Her long-used sceptre; with her jeweled crown
Upon her head, she sat and meted out
Reward and justice; nor did any doubt
Her life was gone. Were not her robes the same—
Her jewels bright? And had she not a name
Borne wide upon the winds for loveliness?
She could not stop—she needs must reign—*noblesse*
Oblige! So I.
But she—married! a wife!
Who once was his! Oh, horrible! a life
Of treason to his memory, a long
Lie! But, ah! no, she never loved him. *I*
Do hold myself as his, and loyally,
Royally, keep my vow.

SERVANT.

What shall I say,
Madam?

THE LADY (*speaks*).

Show in the Count.

(*Aside.*) Ah! well-a-day!
One must do something.

THE COUNT (*entering*).
Madame, je viens—

LAKE ERIE.

THE MAIDEN (*rising from her knees*).

My marriage-morning! Lord, give me thy grace
For the new duties of a wedded life.
The letters have I burned;
And now—the picture. Oh, dear boyish face,
One look—the last! Yet had I been thy wife,
Willie, I had been true to thee—returned
All thy affection to the full.
She said
Love was "a sacrifice." It is; as—thus:
Get thee behind me, Past! [*Burns the picture.*
—Which one of us
Was truest? But why ask? She wronged the dead
With many lovers—nay, her very dress
Showed not one trace of sorrow.

—I confess
I never thought her fair, although the throng
Do call her so, they tell me.
—Long, how long
I wore the heavy crape that checked my breath,
And went about as one who sorroweth;
And I did sorrow! Slow months passed, and I
Gave every thought to tearful memory;
My grief grew selfish.
Then—he brought his suit—
My mother wept and prayed. What right had I
To crush two lives? If by the sacrifice
I make them happy, is it not large price
For my poor, broken years? How earnestly
I strove to do the right!
The patient fruit
Of years of prayer came to my aid, and now
I stand in bridal white. Lord, hear my vow:
Oh, may I make him happy! Not a thought
Of any other love shall mar the troth
I give for *this* life. Evils, troubles, naught
But death, shall part us. Thus the marriage-oath.
But after—*then*—O Willie!

THE MOTHER (*entering*).

Art thou dressed?

That's well, dear one. Never has mother blessed
A child more dutiful, more good.
Come, love,
The bridegroom waits.

THE END.

TWO WOMEN:

A POEM.

By CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON.

[REPRINTED FROM APPLETONS' JOURNAL.]

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